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New Literacies and the Common Core

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The Common Core State Standards recognize that to thrive in the newly wired world, students need to master new ways of reading and writing.

A group of high school students stares intently at the famous crop-duster sequence from Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*. Cary Grant is standing alone at the side of a deserted highway. As film buffs know, Grant isn't alone for long; a mysterious crop-duster plane soon appears out of nowhere and begins dive-bombing him, chasing him down the road until he is forced to take cover in a cornfield. As the students watch the film, they look for moments when editing cuts have been made by the film editor. Each time an edit occurs (when one shot switches to another), they clap their hands. The students' claps become closer and closer together, and it becomes evident that as the scene picks up in intensity, Hitchcock and his film editor have also picked up the pace of the cuts.

This activity is just one of many that I've seen over the last 15 years as I've observed teachers around the world experimenting with a variety of new (and old) media in their classrooms.¹ More recently, I've also witnessed the serious work going on in the United States to implement the Common Core State Standards by 2013–14. I've been struck by how many learning activities and assignments that include some form of the new literacies are perfectly aligned with these new standards.

It makes sense that an emphasis on new ways of reading and writing fits easily within the Common Core umbrella. After all, a primary thrust of the new standards is college and career readiness. How can we hope to prepare our young people to thrive in today's society—in which people are connected 24 hours a day by media and coworkers may well live in different countries—without giving them some practice with new media at school?

And it's more than just an employment issue; it's also a quality-of-life issue. Sharing recipes or sports scores with a Canadian or British friend on Pinterest has become as easy as opening the door and leaning on the backyard fence to chat with a next-door neighbor. As people increasingly interact with the world online, a typical American's daily newspaper might be the online English version of *Le Monde*.

The teachers I have studied take the preparation of students to participate in a wired world seriously, and much of this preparation involves making sure that students are able to navigate new ways of reading and writing. Here are four strategies that can help—each one closely related to one or more of the Common Core standards in English language arts and literacy.²

Give Students Practice Reading Screen-Based Texts

Relevant Common Core Standards:

- *Reading Standards for Literature, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Standard 7, Grade 7.* Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (for example, lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film).
- *Reading Standards for Informational Text, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Standard 7, Grades 11–12.* Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (for example, print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

Some of the new media classroom activities that I've observed focus on helping students gain practice in a key skill advocated by the Common Core standards: the ability to read texts closely—to be text detectives. As students enter a world in which they will do much of their reading and writing on a screen, it makes sense to start by looking at nonprint texts, such as in the genres of video, music, and visual art.

There are actually close parallels between screen-based reading and page-based reading, as I've discovered working with my classes of preservice teachers on some close-reading activities using film. Starting with an idea suggested by media educator [Frank Baker](#), I show the first few minutes of the opening episode of the television series *Lost* without providing any introductory comments. Then students break into small groups, and each group is provided with a description of a film element (see "Prompts for Close Reading of Nonprint and Print Text" on p. 41). For example, they may be assigned to look closely at the lighting or to listen to the music or sound effects. The theme of *Lost* is the epic human battle between good and evil. So the students who are assigned to the lighting group always point out how the scene begins in darkness and then, as the main character regains consciousness, he moves toward light.

Prompts for Close Reading of Nonprint and Print Text

Film Clip Describe one or more details you are seeing in the film clip related to Lighting Editing Shot composition Costuming Set design Sound effects	Visual Art Describe one or more details you are seeing in the art related to Composition Color Light Point of view Brush strokes
Music Describe one or more details you are hearing in the music related to Instrumentation Tempo Rhythm Dynamics Intensity	Print Text Describe one or more details you are finding in the text in terms of Literary Allusion Character Dialogue Descriptive words Length of sentences

After doing this exercise just one time, many students report that they see the video clip in an entirely new way. "I didn't notice that sound effect the first time we watched the scene," they'll report, or "Looking just at the editing made me realize how carefully the scene was planned." They can pick out an amazing level of detail in a scene when they are concentrating on just one element. Students realize that they may have typically watched video scenes on a surface level—for example, focusing on the plane crash that opens the *Lost* episode. Paying attention to one textual element elevates their viewing to a new level.

We then move on to other kinds of texts. Soundtracks from films make great texts for this exercise because many of them include music with no lyrics. I've often used Dave Grusin's beautiful "Theme from *On Golden Pond*," asking students to list words that come to mind when listening to this work. Students rarely recognize at first what film this song is from, but it's amazing how the words they generate—*water, family, transitions, rebirth*—echo the themes from the film. After I reveal the source of the music, we talk about how a composer can make intentional use of textual elements—for example, very high notes on a piano to signify water.

Finally, we transfer to a print text. Copying the film activity, we read aloud a scene in a text we are studying and break into small groups that concentrate on just one element of the text—for example, the author's use of descriptive words, dialogue, or literary allusion. Once students are able to perceive and analyze the details evident in many different kinds of texts, we are moving toward the goal of close reading, no matter what kind of text they read.

Give Students Practice in Digital Writing

Relevant Common Core Standard:

- *Reading Standards, Craft and Structure, Standard 5, Grade 8.* Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

Anyone who has ever written for online publication knows that screen-based writing presents different challenges from those involved with page-based writing. For example, online writers need to understand when adding a hyperlink assists the message and when it detracts; they also need to consider graphic design and layout. The teachers I have observed spend time teaching their students to understand writing for online publication, including all the opportunities that such writing provides.

One of the assignments that I have done with preservice teachers—and have seen them go on to try with their own students—is the Multigenre Autobiography. This assignment requires students to use PowerPoint, Prezi, iMovie, Voicethread, or any number of such platforms to put together a presentation of texts from many genres that have shaped their lives. By doing this task, students get a chance to examine the ways they have been influenced by a variety of different kinds of texts and to compare and contrast the opportunities that each kind of text inherently offers. By creating the autobiography in a nonprint-dominated medium, students also practice digital writing.

As part of the assignment, students present their final autobiographies to the whole class and talk about the key pieces of music, art, video, print fiction, and print nonfiction that have shaped them as human beings. It is amazing to see the variety of genres that have influenced them—from very early books they remember, to special films they shared with their parents, to favorite television shows and songs. I remember well the muscular shot put thrower who described in his autobiography how much he still loves to watch movie musicals because that's what his parents watched with him when he was growing up. Or the 20-year-old woman who was completely engrossed with social networking via Facebook and Twitter and yet was most powerfully shaped by the music of the 1960s—texts that were created decades before she was born.

Going through this exercise is a kind of postmodern adventure as we demystify various kinds of texts and help students see our commonalities and differences as human beings who have grown up with a huge smorgasbord of texts.

Give Students Practice in Collaborative Writing

Relevant Common Core Standard:

- *Writing Standards, Production and Distribution of Writing, Standard 6, Grade 8.* Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

My most recent work has involved interviewing teachers who are attempting to use technology to break down barriers between cultures and set up true international collaborations. Crossing time zones has never been easier; the ease of communication afforded by the Internet has enabled teachers and their students to meet and work with their peers all over the world. The expectation that students will be able to work collaboratively shows up in curriculum documents around the world, so it makes sense that teachers in the United States are linking up with teachers in

other countries to collaborate on projects. Although standardized assessments continue to be based on individual work, we know that our students will, with rare exceptions, be expected to work collaboratively on projects after they graduate. And those projects will frequently involve shaping and writing texts with others.

The famous [Flat Classroom project](#), created by teachers Julie Lindsey and Vicki Davis, is an example of how international student-to-student projects often center on students creating texts together. One classroom, for example, may provide raw video footage that students have shot related to an assigned topic. Another classroom half a world away may then take that raw footage and edit it into a meaningful video.

Learning to piece together a storyline from raw footage helps students understand the concept of sequencing (including flashbacks and flashforwards), which is a key part of storytelling. In addition, as writing in a digital age has become more collaborative (see Wikipedia, for example), seeing how different teams of creators stitch together the raw footage into different narratives illuminates the power of multiple ideas and points of view.

The point is that teachers need to give students time and opportunity to write together. A simple strategy to start practice with collaborative writing is to have students, in small groups, circle interesting words they find in some text—and then challenge them to collaboratively write a poem based on the words that they have chosen together. I've discovered that some of the most effective techniques for getting students ready to read and write in a digital environment do not even involve new technology.

Give Students Practice Working with Informational Texts

Relevant Common Core Standard:

- *Reading Standards for Informational Text, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Standard 7, Grades 11–12.*
Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (for example, visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Frequently, international classroom collaborations involve having students read and collaboratively build nonfiction texts, such as blogs or wikis. The old-fashioned research paper may now appear as a vibrant collection of links woven together with text describing the topic being researched. And the traditional textbook is being transformed as teachers assign students to write their own textbooks online.

For several years, Garth Holman has had his 7th grade social studies students at Beachwood Middle School near Cleveland, Ohio, work to create their own [world history textbook](#). Holman and his students have transformed the traditional textbook into a vibrant, living document that is viewed by other students throughout the world. At the same time, the students have learned how to make good choices about the sources of their material. Their online textbook is an evolving document, demonstrating to students that knowledge isn't static. By building on the work of classes that have gone before them, the students learn about the malleable and, ultimately, collaborative nature of texts, even nonfiction ones.

In many of the international collaborations I have studied, the focus is on nonfiction reading and writing, with teachers selecting online texts that focus on a certain topic. For example, two teachers may create an international collaboration around a unit on oceanography. One teacher may select and bookmark blogs written on topics related to the ocean. Groups of students are then assigned to read these preselected blogs and comment on them. Having students read blogs from across the world is a common way to start international collaborations.

Blogs from institutes of oceanography, such as the [Scripps Institution of Oceanography](#) in San Diego, California, and the [South African Association for Marine Biological Research](#), to name two examples, are just a couple of keystrokes away. These completely current accounts of happenings in the field of oceanography can be not only the sources of the most up-to-date trends of the profession, but also the venues for practicing how to navigate the blogosphere.

Some teachers create collaborative research projects in which students who are far apart geographically contribute data from their respective homes. When studying cities, for example, each classroom might contribute data regarding local industry, recreation, and community demographics.

Not Gadgets, but Teaching

The four strategies described here are not difficult to implement and, ironically, can be attempted with little new technology. More powerful than a room full of gadgets is a teacher who has a deep understanding of what the new forms of reading and writing entail.

A whole host of fundamental literacy implications, as well as global implications, come naturally from a simple yet profound focus on reading texts deeply, writing for digital environments collaboratively, and reading and writing nonfiction texts. It's a hopeful sign that our first widely adopted national standards, the Common Core State Standards, support and even encourage the teaching of these important tasks.

Endnotes

¹ Descriptions of many innovative teaching ideas like those described in this article are included in William Kist's books: *New Literacies in Action: Teaching and Learning in Multiple Media* (Teachers College Press, 2005) and *The Global School: Connecting Classrooms and Students Around the World* (Solution Tree, 2012).

² National Governors Association for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy*. Washington, DC: Authors. Retrieved from www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf

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